

**STATEMENT FOR
THE RECORD BY
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AND
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SECRETARY
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, we are pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the National Association of State Approving Agencies to provide support for and discuss the provisions of H.R. 1716 (Veterans Earn and Learn Act). State Approving Agencies have been an integral part of the administration of the various GI Bills since shortly after the inception of the original GI Bill in June of 1944. It has been our distinct pleasure and honor to have the opportunity to contribute to the success of these programs. A major component of the GI Bills is Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training. Basically, the law and regulations concerning Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training have remained the same since World War II. It is time for an update.

Analysis of HR 1716

We are very pleased with all sections of this bill. Section 1 has a truly outstanding summary of the benefits of Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training. It does: assist employers in hiring and retaining skilled workers, provide a link between training afforded service members and training available in civilian settings for licensing and credentialing, and develop a highly educated and productive work force.

Section 2 standardizes the method which entitlement is used for all Chapters of the GI Bill. Without this change, some Chapters are charged using a method, which places certain eligible individuals at a disadvantage. It is time to fix this inequity.

Concerning Section 3 and 5, the reality is that competency based apprenticeship programs are a viable training method. We have seen these in the automotive industry. In Pennsylvania, there is a training establishment (Advanced Auto Technologies in Ruffsedale, Pennsylvania) which has a training program for Automobile Mechanics. The normal time to complete this program is 8,000 hours (or four years). This program has 21 distinct skill sets, which the apprentice is required to master.

It is possible that the veteran currently enrolled will be able to complete the training in less than four years. Section 3 of this bill provides for a “lump sum” payment for individuals who complete competency based Apprenticeship early. This ensures that no one will be placed at a disadvantage by completing an approved Apprenticeship training program early.

Section 4 provides for increased payments for individuals enrolled in a training program, which includes classroom training. If the classroom training is also approved (such as Police Academy, Fire Academy, etc.,) then the individual will receive the higher benefit. The benefit will not exceed the overall maximum amount. This will remedy the problem of having two eligible individuals (with the same entitlement) in the same classroom receiving different benefit amounts.

In addition to the approval of competency-based Apprenticeship programs, Section 5 provides for the Secretary of Labor to furnish assistance to DVA and SAAs in increasing the use of registered apprenticeship programs. Some states have outstanding working relationships between the SAA and the registering agency. There are a couple of states, which have not been able to develop effective working relationships with their registering agency. There is no question that the sharing of information will be beneficial to all concerned.

Section 6 provides for a pilot program for a three-year On-the-Job Training program for Adjudicators at DVA Regional Processing Offices. This is an excellent area to use for testing whether the approvable length of an On-the-Job Training program should be expanded to beyond the current limit of 24 months.

Section 7 provides for the exchange of data between Department of Defense, Department of Labor and Department of Veterans Affairs to assist with licensing, certification and credentialing requirements. This exchange of data should assist everyone with their outreach efforts.

Outreach Efforts

As you are aware, State Approving Agencies (SAAs) are responsible for the approval and supervision of Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training programs so eligible veterans, reservists, dependents can use their earned benefits. There are many individuals who are not aware that they can use their benefits in an Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training program. They believe that the GI Bill can only be used for college or other educational institutions. We have been working with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Labor and Department of Defense to conduct various outreach efforts to insure veterans, reservists, dependents are aware of all of their choices in using their GI Bill benefits. Recent usage rates identify only 4.2% of the individuals using their GI Bill benefits are enrolled in Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training programs. We have been working to increase that amount. As a side note, we can remember several years ago when usage in training programs was less than 2%. The following is a sample of what SAAs have been doing:

In Pennsylvania, working with the Pennsylvania Advisory Council for Military/Veterans Education (PACMVE), the SAA conducts an active outreach program that includes:

- A “Welcome Home Packet” provides information (a letter from the Governor, a directory of agencies that assist veterans, information concerning apprenticeship/on-the-job training, information concerning the Transition Assistance Program, and a pre-paid post card for the veteran to request additional information) to each returning veteran. This project began in 1990 and has provided information to over 103,000 returning veterans.
- Three informational pamphlets (one for education and two for apprenticeship/on-the-job training) are distributed extensively.
- Mass mailings to County Veterans Affairs Directors, Service Organizations, National Guard members, and selected employers.
- A Veterans Day Ceremony is held in the Department of Education building. Approximately 150 people attend each year. In 2002, special recognition was given Department of Education employees called to active duty.
- A booth at the Pennsylvania Farm Show dedicated exclusively to veterans education/issues. The booth (which included information concerning: G. I. Bill benefits, Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training program, health care, disability benefits, home loan benefits, etc.) is operational for the entire Farm Show week. Many different organizations (Department of Defense 50th Anniversary Committee for the Korean War, counselors from DVA vocational rehabilitation, various service organizations, local DVA work study students, etc.,) assist the SAA with this booth.
- The SAA works closely with the Veterans Employment Representatives and other Department of Labor personnel to participate in various Job Fairs, training sessions, and other outreach activities. In addition, both the Veterans Employment Representative training programs are approved for on-the-job training benefits.
- The SAA works closely with Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training personnel who support the Pennsylvania State Apprenticeship Council. This close working relationship has benefited both organizations. The most successful component of this close working relationship is the two-year registered apprenticeship program for Corrections Officer, which is approved for veteran’s benefits. This is the largest registered and (approved for veterans benefits) training program in Pennsylvania. Some county prisons are also approved for veterans benefits, and SAA staff members assist DVA officials in approving training programs at federal corrections institutions.
- SAA staff members conduct presentations at the Transition Assistance Programs at Willow Grove Naval Air Station, 99th Army Reserve Center at Oakdale, New Cumberland Army Depot and Carlisle Barracks.

In Missouri, outreach is specifically designed to increase participation in on-the-job and apprenticeship training opportunities for VA eligible trainees. The SAA has aggressively pursued outreach to increase usage.

- ❖ Economic impact: The outreach effort includes identification of eligible trainees and orientation for prospective training establishments in the public and private sector.

Since September 1, 1996, this effort has yielded 580 new and additional programs, yielding dramatic economic impact, benefiting over 777 eligible trainees. The economic impact of one veteran receiving an average annual benefit of \$5,608 will impact the economy by approximately \$16,824, according to the Missouri Economic Development Office.

Computing approximate benefits and economic impact from approvals written since September 1, 1996, and participant numbers, a figure of \$10,173,636 is developed.

- ❖ Beyond the impressive impact this program has on economic development through the course of on-the-job training, benefits of well-trained workers and greater stability and enhanced performance within crafts and trades are achieved, there are other benefits. The Missouri Army National Guard, the Missouri Air Force National Guard and the MSAA have teamed to engage in broader outreach activities. Guard recruiters receive orientation training on OJT/Apprenticeship benefits and approval criteria through the SAA to provide accurate program information. The Guard uses the VA work-study program to improve program awareness to prospective trainees and employers
- ❖ The SAA and the Missouri Army National Guard have teamed up to produce compact disc, video and audiotapes on OJT/Apprenticeship. Copies are routinely distributed to strategic points of contact, including public service announcements.
- ❖ The SAA networks with the US Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Services.
- ❖ Presentations to various organizations (area Chambers of Commerce, recruiting stations, law enforcement training centers, etc.) are conducted.
- ❖ The SAA has also used the “Add-A-Stop” program. As time permits, staff that are enroute to or from a scheduled visit to an approved institution/establishment stop at a non-approved location to discuss the Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training program. This does not increase travel costs and has provided excellent results.
- ❖ Approval of “teacher” on-the-job training programs has recently began. The Missouri SAA is also actively involved in the “Troops to Teachers” program.
- ❖ Other outreach efforts include press releases, various pamphlets, posters, participation at various job fairs, etc.

In Texas, the SAA also has an active outreach effort that includes:

- ❑ The SAA has a mailing campaign to inform veterans of their benefits of their benefits. This includes a booklet concerning Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training. In FY 2002, 21,569 packets were mailed.
- ❑ The SAA recently designed and distributed a pamphlet entitled “Earn While You Learn” at Job Fairs, Local Workforce Centers, TAP briefings, and other venues. This pamphlet has a special section concerning Apprenticeship/On-the-Job Training.
- ❑ The SAA works with the local Workforce Boards and the Texas Commission in the distribution of material.
- ❑ The SAA also conducts presentations with various organizations (Apprenticeship and Training Association meetings, etc.,)

In West Virginia, the SAA has increased Apprenticeship/OJT utilization by 44% during the past year by coordination with the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training. Additionally, this year the SAA has instituted the traveling “road show” to promote the use of Apprenticeship and On-the-Job Training programs. This includes workshops/presentations at such events as: Joint

Union & Management Conference, State Sheriff's Association Conference, State City Police Chiefs Association Conference, EMT statewide Conference, and the State Fire Chief's Association, Conference.

Other SAAs have active outreach efforts. There are many opportunities for veterans/reservists/dependents to use their earned benefits while enrolled in training programs. SAAs are continually seeking new and innovative outreach projects to insure that everyone is aware of their opportunities.

Recommendations of the National Association of State Approving Agencies

It is with these beliefs and insights that we support the provisions of H.R. 1716. In addition, we would also request that when the time is appropriate, consideration be given to modifying the current payment formula (percentage) provided for eligible individuals enrolled in training programs. Currently the percentages are: 75% (of the amount they would receive if attending an educational institution) for the first 6 months, 55% for the next six months and 35% for the remainder of the program. NASAA recommends these percentages increase to: 100% for the first six months, 75% for the next six months and 50% for the remainder of the program.

Closing

We encourage the leadership and members of this Committee to take a firm and aggressive stand in promoting the enactment of the provisions of H.R. 1716.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to address you today. We would be pleased to respond to any questions that you have.